

PERILS OF LEAVING A NOVICE SHOOTER ALONE

A photograph of a civilian shooting range. Several people are visible at different firing stations, which are equipped with targets and ammunition boxes. The range is outdoors, with a wooden building in the background and trees visible in the distance. The overall scene is a typical recreational shooting environment.

By Pete Faerber

I do a lot of shooting and often teach others. Because I have a large collection of firearms, I frequently teach people how to shoot different types of guns. On one occasion, a co-worker had asked me to take his sons to a local civilian range and give them such an opportunity.

The older son is something of an adrenaline junky, and the only specific request he had for me in choosing firearms was “something powerful, with a lot of recoil.” The younger son, on the other hand, wasn’t yet over the anxiety new shooters often have about recoil and asked for something more manageable. I decided to bring a spread of firearms for them to work with, starting with a relatively heavy .22 LR revolver and progressing in power through a .44 Magnum to a .454 Casull.

During a safety brief, I covered the safety rules—those particular to the range and those that applied to the handguns we would be firing that day. Then, the shooting started.

I was supervising two separate firing points, one for each shooter. The plan was to leave the firearms and ammunition boxes in place on the firing points and simply to swap

out the shooters from one lane to the next when they wanted to try a new firearm. After about 20 minutes of shooting, the 9-mm ammunition started running low, so I left the father with his two sons and went to buy more rounds.

When I returned, we kept shooting until the range was about to close. The father and older son were encouraging the younger son to try “the big ones.” It was obvious he wanted to give them a whirl but was apprehensive about the recoil. He decided to give the .44 Magnum a try, so I reached into the ammunition box and simultaneously pulled out two cartridges. I then loaded them into their chambers, set down the revolver, and allowed him to close its cylinder. He really enjoyed his first shot, and, after the second one, his face said, “Bring on the big stuff.”

We switched to the .454 Casull, and, again, I reached into the ammunition box, withdrew two rounds, and loaded them into the chambers the same way as before. As he closed the cylinder and started to pull the trigger, the anticipation of brutal recoil was etched into his face. When the hammer fell, though, the recoil was surprisingly light; the muzzle flash and

sound of the shot also were less than expected. Because the recoil was so light, he said, “That wasn’t so bad!”

Having watched him take the shot, I thought to myself, “Yeah, that really didn’t seem like a lot of recoil.” Before I could put two and two together, though, he had taken his second shot. Confident from the lighter-than-expected recoil the first time, he had loosened his grip on the second shot, and the revolver nearly smacked him in the forehead. The muzzle flash this time also was huge, and the sound was tremendous—just what you’d expect from a .454 Casull.

I soon figured out the difference between the two shots. The first had been fired through a revolver chambered for the .454, but it actually was a .44-Magnum cartridge. The latter has a slightly smaller diameter and will fit in the chamber of a .454, even though the handgun isn’t designed for it. The .44 cartridge is close enough in size that the firing pin will strike the primer and cause it to fire, despite the fact the chamber doesn’t support it.

This situation is very dangerous because the brass case of the cartridge expands well past its designed limit—to the point of rupturing at times. High-pressure gases also can



The author took a spread of firearms to the range, starting with a .22 LR revolver similar to this one.

Comparing a .454 Casull cartridge (left) with a .44 Magnum cartridge (right).



travel in all sorts of unexpected directions, and fragments of the brass case can become shrapnel. Because the gases aren’t traveling in their intended directions, the bullet also can get stuck in the barrel. If this problem arises, the next shot may burst the barrel—just like you see happening with Porky Pig’s shotgun when Bugs Bunny stuffs his finger in the muzzle.

In our case, everyone was wearing wrap-around eye protection, no one was injured, and the revolver wasn’t damaged. Here’s how our situation developed.

While trying to psyche himself up for the heavy recoil, the younger son had been doing lots of side-by-side comparisons of the various cartridges. He was setting them on the firing bench next to each other to look at their relative sizes. As we were putting the rounds back in their boxes, one of us put a .44-Magnum round in the .454-Casull box without knowing it. Later, while loading the rounds into the revolver, I grabbed the misplaced round and a .454 Casull round without noticing the .014 difference in size. I mistakenly assumed that pulling two rounds from the same box meant I had two rounds of the same caliber.

What are the lessons to be learned here? For starters, always make sure you’re putting the right ammunition into the firearm you’re using. Second, when something doesn’t seem right, say so immediately—I noticed the recoil seemed light but wasted time trying to figure

out why instead of saying, “Stop!” Third, when you’re using similarly sized ammunition around shooting novices, pay extra attention to what they’re doing. I left the range for several minutes to buy more ammunition, which is when I suspect the switch took place.

I’ve decided to quit taking firearms with similarly sized cartridges to the range at the same time. In other words, when I’m shooting a 9 mm, I won’t have a .40 S&W with me because the latter readily will chamber and fire a 9-mm round. The same thing goes for the .22 LR and .22 WMR, as well as the .44 Magnum

and .454 Casull and several other combinations.

I’ve also decided I won’t leave inexperienced shooters alone at the range. Finally, I’ll incorporate a warning into my safety briefs about making certain you know what you’re chambering in a firearm. **A**

The author was a Marine Corps major assigned to the Naval Safety Center when he wrote this article. However, he since has left active duty and is attending law school.

IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE...



By Ken Testorff,
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That’s how quickly a person’s life can change. Just ask the 23-year-old E-5 who is facing a lifelong sentence of paralysis after a civilian friend (former Sailor) accidentally shot him. The friend was reassembling and reloading a .45-caliber pistol he had cleaned.

This mishap occurred at the private residence of the E-5 and his housemate, a Navy E-6. The latter was in another room and didn’t witness the shooting; however, he and the friend gave first aid to the victim and called 911.

Once at a local hospital, the victim was talking and moving limbs, so doctors believed

The sound made when a .454 Casull fires is tremendous. Some people even say the term “ka boom” was invented to describe that sound.

his prognosis was good. They thought the bullet had entered the back of his neck and had exited through his cheek. Exploratory surgery, though, revealed otherwise.

The bullet had fragmented after entering the back of the victim’s neck on the left side. One fragment was lodged inside his spinal column, while another had exited through his left cheek. Surgery also revealed damaged

jugular and carotid arteries, which the doctors were able to repair.

A neurosurgeon, however, reviewed the case and determined the victim probably had irreversible damage to his spinal cord. In a few days, when the victim had regained some feeling in his toes and lower extremities, doctors determined that removing the bullet fragment would provide the best chance of recovery.

Surgery to remove the fragment was successful, and the doctors learned the spinal cord wasn't damaged. They didn't have to fuse vertebrae to stabilize the victim's neck. However, there was one important piece of bad news: The nerve root of one vertebrae on the left side was severed completely. This finding meant the victim would be paralyzed for life, except for some use of his head and possible use of his right arm.

According to the police report and the E-6 housemate, no alcohol or drugs were involved in this case. The E-6 and civilian friend were credited with saving the victim's life.

In another incident, a student O-2 was in his apartment when a neighbor and classmate called. The latter was asking questions about loading and unloading a new rifle he just had bought. The O-2 invited the classmate to his apartment to troubleshoot an apparent problem with the weapon.

After several failed attempts to load and unload the rifle with live rounds, the O-2 started to his room to get a cleaning rod to clear a possible obstruction inside the muzzle. Meanwhile, the neighbor stood up with the rifle in his hands. A round

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accidentally discharged, entering the top of the O-2's left foot and exiting his heel in a crossing pattern, from left to right.

The victim called 911 and was taken to a naval hospital for treatment and observation. Doctors released him a few days later, and he spent 30 days on convalescent leave.

As the victim's CO commented, "Every weapon should be treated as though it's loaded. The O-2 lost track of how many rounds he had put in the chamber. Then he broke the most important rule of all: Never cross a line of fire. He should consider himself very lucky." ■

A shooter fires a
.44 Magnum revolver.

